Class Warfare Indeed

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Over the last two decades or more, Republicans have been denouncing as "class warfare" any attempt at criticizing and restraining their mean one-sided system of capitalist financial expropriation.

The moneyed class in this country has been doing class warfare on our heads and on those who came before us for more than two centuries. But when we point that out, when we use terms like class warfare, class conflict, and class struggle to describe the system of exploitation we live under—our indictments are dismissed out of hand and denounced as Marxist ideological ranting, foul and divisive.

Amanda Gilson put it perfectly in a posting on my Facebook page: "[T]he concept of 'class warfare' has been hi-jacked by the wrong class (the ruling class). The wealthy have been waging war silently and inconspicuously against the middle and the poor classes for decades! Now that the middle and poor classes have begun to fight back, it is like the rich want to try to call foul---the game was fine when they were the only ones playing it."

The reactionary rich always denied that they themselves were involved in class warfare. Indeed, they insisted no such thing existed in our harmonious prosperous society. Those of us who kept talking about the realities of class inequality and class exploitation were readily

denounced. Such concepts were not tolerated and were readily dismissed as ideologically inspired.

In fact, class itself is something of a verboten word. In the mainstream media, in political life, and in academia, the use of the term "class" has long been frowned upon. You make your listeners uneasy ("Is the speaker a Marxist?"). If you talk about class exploitation and class inequity, you will likely not get far in your journalism career or in political life or in academia (especially in fields like political science and economics).

So instead of working class, we hear of "working families" or "blue collar" and "white collar employees". Instead of lower class we hear of "inner city poor" and "low-income elderly." Instead of the capitalist owning class, we hear of the "more affluent" or the "upper quintile." Don't take my word for it, just listen to any Obama speech. (Often Obama settles for an even more cozy and muted term: "folks," as in "Folks are strugglin' along.")

"Class" is used with impunity and approval only when it has that magic neutralizing adjective "middle" attached to it. The middle class is an acceptable mainstream concept because it usually does not sharpen our sense of class struggle; it dilutes and muffles critical consciousness. If everyone in America is middle class (except for a few superrich and a minor stratum of very poor), there is little room for any awareness of class conflict.

That may be changing with the Great Recession and the sharp decline of the middle class (and decline of the more solvent elements of the working class). The concept of middle class no longer serves as a neutralizer when it itself becomes an undeniable victim.

"Class" is also allowed to be used with limited application when it is part of the holy trinity of race, gender, and class. Used in that way, it is reduced to a demographic trait related to life style, education level, and income level. In forty years of what was called "identity politics" and "culture wars," class as a concept was reduced to something of secondary importance. All sorts of "leftists" told us how we needed to think anew, how we had to realize that class was not as important as race or gender or culture.

I was one of those who thought these various concepts should not be treated as being mutually exclusive of each other. In fact, they are interactive. Thus racism and sexism have always proved functional for class oppression. Furthermore, I pointed out (and continue to point out), that in the social sciences and among those who see class as just another component of "identity politics," the concept of class is treated as nothing more than a set of demographic traits. But there is another definition of class that has been overlooked.

Class should also be seen as a social relationship relating to wealth and social power, involving a conflict of material interests between those who own and those who work for those who own. Without benefit of reason or research, this latter usage of class is often dismissed out of hand as "Marxist." The narrow reductionist mainstream view of class

keeps us from seeing the extent of economic inequality and the severity of class exploitation in society, allowing many researchers and political commentators to mistakenly assume that U.S. society has no deep class divisions or class conflicts of interest.

We should think of class not primarily as a demographic trait but as a relationship to the means of production, as a relationship to power and wealth. Class as in slaveholder and slave, lord and serf, capitalist and worker. Class as in class conflict and class warfare.

And who knows, once we learn to talk about the realities of class power, we are on our way to talking critically about capitalism, another verboten word in the public realm. And once we start a critical discourse about capitalism, we will be vastly better prepared to act against it and defend our own democratic and communal interests.

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